

FORT FRAYNE.

By Capt. CHARLES KING, U.S.A.

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CHAPTER VIII.

Abandoned at Mrs. Daunt's failure to return them, Leale had tossed the reins to his orderly, and leaving Mrs. Farrar seated in the sleigh, hurried into the building in search of her. It was a prostrate, senseless form he found, close to the inner door, and only after a deal of trouble did he revive. Greatly alarmed, Mrs. Farrar had caused her to be driven straight home, and there the doctor came and Ellis and ministering angels without number, but meantime Leale, with wretched face, had gone to his troop quarters and summoned his first sergeant, Grace, who had not been with the men at dinner, was that worthy's support. He was at the post exchange eating sandwiches and drinking beer at that moment, and Leale sent for him.

Something had tended to sober the man, for he came into the captain's presence, looking calm, but self-possessed. "I warned you after that affair with Crow Knife," said Leale, "that you were to keep out of temptation and mischief until you were sober enough to understand what I had to say to you. Where were you when dinner called and I called?"

"Walking off my head, sir, as the captain directed."

Leale stood closely scanning the swollen face of the soldier. He was always grave and deliberate in dealing with the malcontents of his command, rarely speaking in anger and never in a tone indicative of irritation. Under the captain's calm, steadfast scrutiny Grace plainly winced. His bloodshot eyes wandered restlessly about, and his fingers closed and unclenched nervously.

"You have made but an ill name for yourself thus far, man," said Leale, "and this day's work has not added to your credit. What started the trouble with Crow Knife?"

"He struck me," was the surly answer.

"You have been drinking liquor today, Grace, and it is said of you throughout the whole troop that when drinking you are ugly and ill tempered. I have known Crow Knife a long time and never knew him to be in trouble before. You are the first man of this command to quarrel with him. Let it be the last time. He bears a good name; you have made a bad one. Another thing: You were working there at the hall this morning under Corporal Burke. What became of you when the other men left and went to dinner?"

"I was thirsty—and went for a drink," was the shifty answer.

"Where were you when I sent you to the post exchange?"

"The soldier turned redder, if possible, blushed uneasily, the bloodshot eyes still wandering restlessly about, as though eager for any light other than that which burned in the clear, stern gaze of his captain. "I went for a drink," he repeated, "and I'm not bound to say where and so get some one else in trouble. I'm not without friends here even if I haven't them among my officers, and I can be true to those who are true to me."

"Such talk is humbug, Grace," said Leale coolly, "and you know it. You will do better to keep clear of friends who give you liquor. You are sober enough to appreciate now what you hear and what you say. Keep clear of it, I warn you, or it will be your undoing. Are you not for guard?"

"I am, sir, and ready to take my turn when needed, but I can take no such affront as that redskinsling in my teeth."

"Enough on that score. I'll hear your story tomorrow, when you're both cool and down. Now go to your quarters, and for the rest of this day keep away from three things—Crow Knife, liquor and, understand me, the assembly hall."

The gullen eyes glowed with new anger. The man had been drinking just enough to be reckless. "I'd like to know why I'm not considered fit to work at least," he muttered.

"You are not fit to be seen by the eyes of gently nurtured women, Grace. Your face is bloated, your eyes inflamed, your whole carriage tells of the havoc liquor plays. You may as well know that the sight of you was a shock to our guest, Mrs. Farrar, and I suspect that you could tell what it was that so startled Mrs. Daunt."

"I don't know any such"—began the soldier in the same surly tone, but Leale lifted his hand.

"The less you say when you're been drinking, my man, the less you're likely to fall into further trouble. You go no more to the assembly room today, because I forbid. Do you understand?"

"I've got rights to go there. Aye, or where my betters cannot go," burst in Grace in sudden fury, but the instant his eyes met those of his captain the words died on his lips and the red lids dropped.

"You have said more than enough, sir," sternly answered Leale. Then, turning sharply to a little knot of non-commissioned officers who at the barracks steps were curiously watching the scene, he called, "Sergeant Roe!" and a young soldier in natty uniform came springing forward, and, holding close at hand, stood at the salute.

"I leave this man in your charge. He is for guard, I believe. Set him to work at his kit and see that he is in proper trim—in every way—for tomorrow."

"He may be needed today, sir. He's superintending."

"Indeed! Worse than I thought, Grace," said Leale calmly. "You will be wise to take a cool bath and a nap then. At all events, see that he does not leave the barracks this afternoon, sergeant."

"I will, sir. Come on, Grace."

And conscious that he had been indeed playing with fire, yet raging over the sense of his enforced submission, the half-drunk fellow turned and followed his young superior.

As there had been anxiety and dismay at the Farrars', Helen had speedily been restored to consciousness, only to be overcome by a fit of hysterical weeping, succeeded by a nervous attack that defied the efforts of her four friends. Mrs. Farrar had, of course,

sent for the doctor, but Helen insisted that his presence was utterly unnecessary. She begged to be left alone. She declared the attack to be no new thing. She had suffered just in the same way before, though not for two or three years. She seemed eager to rid herself of all attendants. In truth, her one longing was to be allowed to think undisturbedly. Even at night this might have been difficult. By day, with sympathetic inquiries coming every few minutes to her door and with her gentle friend sitting at her bedside, she found it impossible. If she closed her eyes, that lingering, half-drunken, swollen, triumphant face came to torment and distract her. If she opened them, it was only to find herself, in a moment, looking over her full of tenderness, sympathy and unspoken inquiry. Do what she could to allay it, Helen Daunt could plainly tell that Mrs. Farrar more than suspected that there was some exciting cause for that sudden prostration. In utter helplessness she lay, striving to plan, striving to see a way out of this new and most appalling complication. That the man who had wrecked her life should return as it were from the grave was in itself horrible enough, but that he should reappear in the flesh here, at Frayne, where his presence was a menace to the peace of so many who were dear to her and to the very life perhaps of the gentle invalid who was nearest of all, was torment indeed.

For some hours she lay there facing her fate, shutting out all thought of her newborn hope and joy thus summarily blighted, seeing only, thinking only of the peril that involved her friend. The short winter day wore on. The spirits of the younger members of the social circle seemed undimmed, for, as stable calm was sounding, she could hear merry chat and laughter again in the parlor below stairs. Ellis alone seemed to share with her mother the anxiety or uneasiness which followed the events of the morning. She had refused to join the little party that had gone up, as they expressed it, "to call on Kitty." She had refused partly from a feeling of indisposition to my guest, partly from a sisterly sympathy for Will, who, she felt well assured, longed for an uninterrupted half hour with his capricious laylove, and partly because she shrank from appearing in the colonel's parlor, thereby possibly giving Ormsby half a reason to think she caught him. Evidently the young people had had small mercy on Will. Evidently Kitty had lent herself not unwillingly to the fun at his expense, for, after biting savagely at his finger nail and tugging furiously at his mustache, the body had pitched angrily out of the colonel's house and come home for comfort, and thither had they followed him, two or three hapless couples, and, catching him in the parlor, all unconscious of Mrs. Daunt's seclusion aloft, were as bent on coaxing him to return with them as he, with assumption of lordly indifference, was determined to make it appear that he had no such desire or intention. He carried his point too. He knew well enough that Kitty's complicity in the plot was for the express purpose of teasing him. He couldn't afford to let them see he was indignant at her or at them; neither could he afford to let her see that he was not justly offended. And right in the midst of all the babel of protest and laughter the doorbell rang, and at the head of the stairs, just as stable call was sounding, listening ears heard the unctuous, jovial tones of Corporal Roe inquiring for Captain Leale.

Then Will's voice responded, and Will was very distant and dignified. "Captain Leale is not here, corporal. Have you been to his quarters?"

"Sure, I went there first, sorr, and they told me he was here if anywhere. Thin, bedad, he's nowhere."

"He's gone down to the stables already, perhaps," said Farrar, "and you'll find him there. Yonder goes the call now."

"I know, Maister—I know, sorr, but the thoroughbred's right here, sorr. Higgins has been took off on guard. He was right out here on No. 5, sorr, back of the quarters, and that spalpeen Grace is superintending, and they've sent for him, and the first sergeant's afraid, sorr."

"What of?"

"Grace had been drinkin this mornin. He's sober enough now, sorr, but he's nervous, wildlike, excited, tramping up and down the barracks flate like a caged hyena, sorr."

"Then tramping up and down the sentry post will be just the thing for him. I'll cool him off. Put him on."

"Very well, sorr. Just as the lieutenant says. I'll tell the sergeant at once."

Five minutes later the parlor was deserted, and all was silence below. Now at least Helen Daunt could close her eyes and plan and think. He was to be placed on guard. He would be on post right out here on the bluff. Then what was to prevent her slipping out in the dusk of the evening, when all the others had gone over to the assembly hall, speaking with him, pleading with him, imploring him to go away, anywhere—anywhere where he would not again in drunken mood endanger that poor mother's life by the sudden shock of his presence? She would agree to anything; she would follow him, slave for him, starve with him, be his wife or his handmaid—anything to get him away—far away from the sunshine, the smiles, the hopes and joys and blessings that had been hers at old Fort Frayne.

One other plan. She had but little money, and in their flight much might be needed. She must obtain it, for that drink-soaked wretch would surely have none. Go she must and would. Go he must and should, for any day before the whole garrison—oh, shame unutterable—he might take the notion boldly to throw off all disguise and claim her as his wife. Possibly with money she might bribe him to take kindly to her proposition and agree. Then, before he could spend what she had given him, she could escape, return to the east, and somewhere, anywhere hide her head from him, from friends, from the world and all. Home she had none. That went when her father died, lonely and heart-broken, two years before.

And in all that garrison to whom could she appeal, upon whom could she call? One man there was who, well she knew, would open his hand as he had his heart, and its uttermost treasure could be hers for the mere asking, and that man of all others was the one who, she prayed, might never know the

misérable truth that this was Royle Farrar—that she was Royle Farrar's wife.

Another there was, generous, helpful and kind, who, did he but learn the identity of the man slinking here and there that disguise given by years of drink and debauchery, would aid her to his utmost faithful aid, and as he had before, out of pity and compassion, aid her now with eager hand through thought of the shame that would come to the girl he loved, the shock that might be in store for her beloved mother. There was the man—Jack Ormsby! But how to see him, and when, and where? Not a moment must be lost, because now that Royle's presence was known to her, his wife, no moment might bring on the further catastrophe. She had never known him to stop until sober and stanch.

Drink, drink, drink. In some form he would find the poison and gulp it down, waxing crazed and maddened; if it were withheld from him, turning mad and reckless if it were given. Drink he surely would all through this blessed Christmas eve, and at any hour, any moment on the morrow she might expect him to appear before them all, in the midst of their joyous Christmas gathering, in drunken exultation, demanding his seat at his wife's side, at his mother's board. What that would mean to that gentle mother, whose very life seemed now hanging by a thread, God alone could say.

And here she lay, hesitant, impatient, cowardly, when the lives and happiness of those dearest to her were at stake, shrinking even now from an appeal to Ormsby, who alone in all the garrison probably was competent to advise and help, and Ormsby had already suffered, and suffered much on her account. In the loyal observance of his promise he had brought himself under the ban of suspicion, and with half an eye Helen could see that Ellis looked upon their relation with utter distrust. Great heaven! Was she to be a curse to every one who had been kind to her? The thought was intolerable.

Helen Daunt amazed her friend by springing from her bed and throwing up the window sash. "Air, air!" she moaned. "I feel as though I were suffocating," and, leaning far out into the wintry twilight, bathing her aching head in the cold, sparkling air, she gazed wildly northward toward the bluff. Aye, muffled in the heavy canvas overcoat, the fur cap down about the bloated, bearded face, slouching along the sentry post was the form she dreaded, hated to see, yet sought with burning eyes. As she gazed he saw and stood and, hovering over the intervening drifts of spotless snow, kissed his fur-gloved paw and tossed his hand in half defiant, half derisive, all insulting salutation.

"Mrs. Farrar," she cried in utter desperation, turning away from the hateful sight, "I—I must get into the open air awhile. You won't mind, dear. I must walk, walk, run, rush in the cold. No, don't come, and pray let Ellis keep with you. In 10, 20 minutes at most, I'll return."

"Ah, Helen, wait until Willy, until Malcolm Leale, returns from the stables. See, they're coming now. They will walk with you."

"Oh, no, no, no. Do you not see? I must be alone. I cannot talk with any one. Let me go," she cried. Then, before either the mother could interpose or Ellis, who came hurrying into the room, could urge one word, she had seized a heavy wrap and gone almost bounding down the stairs.

At the threshold she recoiled, for there, his honest face full of eagerness as the door flew open, stood Jack Ormsby.

"I cannot talk with any one. Let me go," she cried. "I was just about to ring," he faltered, "and inquire after you—and for—Miss Farrar. You really startled me."

And up aloft they heard—Ellis heard—the eager, low toned, almost breathless answer. "Oh, Mr. Ormsby. It was you I sought. Come—right in here."

And drawing him into the parlor she closed the door, reckless now of anything Ellis might suspect, thinking only of the peril that menaced one and all. Perhaps Jack Ormsby's longing eyes caught one fleeting glimpse of feminine drapery at the head of the little staircase. Perhaps his own wrongs and woes had overmastered him. Perhaps he thought that already he had been too heavily involved, all on account of this fair sufferer and suppliant, but certain it was he followed, hesitant, and that it was with a far from reassuring face he confronted his captor.

"Mr. Ormsby," she burst forth, "how much money would you give, at once, this day, to rid this post of the greatest shame and misery that could be brought upon Ellis and her mother?"

"I can't imagine what you mean," was the uncertain answer.

"I mean that Royle Farrar is here—in this garrison—a private soldier in Captain Leale's troop."

"Mrs. Daunt! Are you mad?" He came before me 20 steps away and, with his mother, not 20 steps away and, taunted me, and threatened me. Oh, God, he means it! He means to make himself known to them and claim their kinship in the way to shame them into it. And the shock will kill her, kill her!"

"I think if you will excuse me, Mrs. Farrar, I will go to mother a moment. She is at the chaplain's with her. Still, I feel anxious. All this may excite her very much."

And so, while the officers went hurrying away across to the adjutant's office, Ormsby found himself, after all, tendering his arm to Miss Farrar. He was the only man left. Kitty, excited and agitated, knew not why, had made some comical attempt to detain Will, but his long legs had by this time carried him half way to the scene of the sudden summons.

"Thank you, no. I do not need it," said Ellis coldly. "Indeed, I do not need escort at all to go so short a distance."

"It seems to be the post custom none the less," was the grave answer. "Besides, I think I am justified in saying you have treated me with aversion so marked of late that I am entitled to know the cause. What can I have done to deserve it, Ellis? Let us understand each other."

"There is only one way, then, Mr. Ormsby," she answered, "to know the cause. Let us understand each other."

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Ormsby," she answered, with sudden impulse. "Who is Helen Daunt?"

"Ellis, I cannot tell you now," was the sorrowful, gentle answer. "Do not think with me yet a little while."

"Yes—I know."

"And you say let us understand each other."

"I accept them from my honor, Ellis, for I have given my word. No," he hesitated, as the husband as though to leave him, "listen, for it may be my last opportunity tonight. I know it seems hard and strange to you that when I would lay my whole life upon before you, I must not yet tell you this. But, Ellis, I give you my honor. I am hiding nothing shameful in that poor woman nor to me. It is only for a time I must be silent. When I can speak, you'll forgive me, dear. You will think me that I do keep silence now. Trust me, Ellis. Can you not look up at me and say you trust me?"

"Ah, how pleading was his tone, how full of love and fire and tenderness his manly face, as in that still winter night he looked down into her eyes. Over at the barracks there was a sudden stop to all the music, but men's voices could be heard in excited talk. Along officers' rows many a door was opened and women and children were peering out in search of explanation of the unusual summons. Over at the adjutant's office a dark throng had gathered, the officers of the garrison and other knights of soldiers or Indians could be seen, but Jack and Ellis saw, heard, nothing of this. Her voice had the ring of steel to it as she answered:

"If it were just a question of my own happiness, I might trust you, but it is my mother's happiness—perhaps her life. I must know all there is to know about that woman when my mother trusts so blindly. I must know for myself. In the name of the love you offer me will you tell me the truth about her?"

"Ellis, I cannot tonight. I have given my word."

"Then keep it," said she with sudden passion. "Keep it and keep your love." Then she turned and fled within the chaplain's gate, leaving him standing on the snowy walk without, sorrowing, yet defeated.

For a moment he fixed these following her with his eyes. Never stopping to knock or ring, she turned the knob and let herself into the brightly lighted hall. He caught a glimpse of the gray-haired chaplain bending over a womanly form. He caught one fleeting view of Helen Daunt's anxious face. Evidently the call had been heard there, too, and, coming as it did in the stillness of the holiday evening, it boded no good. Only on rare occasions or some sudden emergency was Fenton known to call every duty officer to his presence, even by day, and he would be almost the last man to break in upon the festivities of the season with a stern call to arms unless arms and men both were needed somewhere. The day had been one long trial to Mrs. Farrar, and since one long trial to her obedient friend.

And so, as they were needed about the chaplain's fire and the trumpet notes were heard, and a servant hastening in said, "Mr. Ormsby's call, sir," just as Ellis feared her mother was seized with sudden faintness. "My boy, Willy! I won't take him," she faltered, and then sank back nerveless into her chair.

Ormsby turned and sped away for the office. At least he could ascertain the cause of the summons and bring them tidings if it meant no more, but the first glance through the window at his neighbor's face, as he stood surrounded by his officers, told the New Yorker, already experienced in frontier garrison life, that something imminent was in the wind. Fenton was talking rapidly, as was his wont when roused, and the only faces in the group that did not seem to kindle in response to the light in his keen, sparkling eyes were those of two heavily blanketed Indians standing sullen and imperturbable beside him. Out in the snow half a dozen non-commissioned officers were gathered in a group by the little knot of Indian ponies and cowboy bronchos. An Indian boy, lolling in his saddle, replied in monosyllables to their eager questions. A brace of cowboys, one of them obviously in liquor, sought to impress upon all within hearing their version of some row that had evidently taken place. Among the bystanders was Ormsby's old friend, the sergeant major, and to him he appealed.

"What's up, sergeant?"

"Been a fight, sir—cowboys and Indians. Christmas drunk, I reckon. The cowboys were having some fun with their lariats, and they roped old Big Head off his pony and shot at him when he showed fight. Then his two sons shot Laramie Pete, and it looks like a general scrimmage. Big Head's whole village is camped only ten miles down stream, and they're war dancing all night."

(Continued on page three.)

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